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SUBJECT: ECA CULTURAL ENVOYS HAVE A BALL IN OMAN

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Summary  
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1. ECA Cultural Envoys Omari Faulkner and Courtland Freeman engaged a wide range of Omani basketball players, coaches, and students during their highly successful four-day visit to the Sultanate. Welcomed by dignitaries including the newly appointed Minister of Sports Affairs, the duo established immediate and positive connections with audiences of different ages and backgrounds, while garnering extensive and positive press coverage, particularly in the Arabic press. End summary.

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A Hit Right From The Opening Tip  
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2. From November 21-25, 2004, recent Georgetown University graduates and current ECA Cultural Envoys Omari Faulkner and Courtland Freeman conducted a series of basketball clinics and workshops for players and coaches during their visit to the Sultanate of Oman. The visit tipped off with a two-day session at the Bausher Club, an up-and-coming athletic association in Muscat. During the opening ceremony, which was attended by the Minister of Sports Affairs H.E. Ali al-Sunaidi as well as the President of the Bausher Club and other dignitaries, the Ambassador delivered remarks highlighting the on-court skills and off-court academic achievement and service of the Cultural Envoys. After the opening ceremony, Mr. Faulkner and Mr. Freeman discussed with coaches and players the advantages and disadvantages of certain defensive and offensive set plays. This was followed by a lively Q&A session that focused on identifying strategies for developing successful basketball teams. Later that day, the Envoys conducted a basketball clinic for Bausher Club players; the clinic, which was scheduled for 90 minutes, continued for over three hours because of high demand. Ten Omani girls participated in the basketball drills, an all-too rare sight in a country where the sexes are typically separated during sporting activities.

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In The Zone  
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3. The next morning, the Envoys were treated to a tour of the Muscat capital region, courtesy of Bausher Club officials. The tour included a visit to Muscat's Mutrah souq, the Bait al-Zubair Museum, and a windshield tour of the Bausher district. That afternoon, the Envoys again directed a series of drills and clinics for young Bausher Club members. Excitement built throughout the day as club players awaited a demonstration game at the nearby Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex, requested spontaneously by the Minister of Sports Affairs the previous day. Mr. Faulkner and Mr. Freeman played for the Bausher Club team against the Muscat Stars, a team made up of players from Oman's national squad. (The Muscat Stars won 64-59.) After the spirited game, the Bausher Club and the Oman Basketball Association presented the Envoys with trophies and traditional Omani khanjars (ceremonial daggers).

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Fast Break  
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4. The program continued with a journey to the city of Al-Buraimi, about 350 km. northwest of Muscat on the border with the UAE. The Cultural Envoys visited Al-Buraimi College, the site of one of Oman's five American Corners, met with the president of the college, and toured the facility. Afterwards the Envoys and a busload of Al-Buraimi college students traveled to a nearby junior high school where the players held a basketball clinic for forty college and junior high students. An audience of over two hundred students observed the clinic. Although female students in this provincial town were reluctant to participate in the workshop, they eagerly joined the boys in requesting autographs from the Cultural Envoys.

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Iraq Bounces In  
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15. In many ways the most rewarding portion of the Cultural Envoys' trip to Oman was their visit to Al-Buraimi. The visit was a big event for the city, as young people from all over town came to the workshop to meet the players. For many of them this was the first time they had met Americans. During the workshop, the PAO was introduced to the dean of Al-Buraimi College and a young student, both of whom are Iraqis from Fallujah. After exchanging pleasantries, they said, "We disagree with what you Americans are doing in Fallujah, but we respect you for bringing high level U.S. athletes to Al-Buraimi. Most embassies focus on Muscat and ignore other towns." This encounter speaks volumes about the effectiveness of the Cultural Envoy program as a tool to promote positive public attitudes toward American society and values, and to reinforce the Embassy's ties with contacts across Oman.

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Courtland And Omari Assist TAISM  
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16. The student-athletes rounded out their visit with a program at The American International School of Muscat (TAISM), a school with 360 students from over 30 different countries. Mr. Faulkner and Mr. Freeman addressed the morning assembly, detailing the challenges and rewards of pursuing a balance between academics and extracurricular activities. Next, they visited a 9th-grade Health class and discussed issues such as the dangers of drug use and the importance of setting goals. After giving an interview to the school newspaper, the two players conducted three separate basketball clinics for 4th-graders, 5th-graders, and middle school students. The TAISM students reacted positively to the Cultural Envoys, viewing them as role models and asking enthusiastically for autographs. The secondary school principal praised the Envoys upon their departure, commenting that the two young men "had a good message" for TAISM's students. After completing their program at TAISM, the players journeyed to the PAO's residence for lunch with selected journalists and editors from Oman's press establishment.

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A Full-Court Press For The Media  
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17. Media coverage of the program was extensive and positive, particularly in the Arabic-language press. The November 22 editions of the Arabic-language dailies "Al-Shabiba" (estimated circulation 30,000) and "Al-Watan" (circulation 40,000) featured articles on the opening ceremony at the Bausher Club, complete with photographs of the event and of the Cultural Envoys. The English-language newspaper "Oman Daily Observer" (circulation 20,000) carried a similar article. On November 23, the Envoys hit the trifecta by appearing in all three of the Arabic-language dailies, including the government-owned "Oman" (circulation 38,000). Both "Oman" and "Al-Shabiba" published quarter-page stories about the demonstration game at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex with large color photographs, as did the "Oman Daily Observer." Finally, on November 25, the "Oman Daily Observer" ran a piece about the Cultural Envoy program, with excerpts from interviews with Mr. Faulkner and Mr. Freeman.

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A Genuine Slam-Dunk  
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18. If the pilot program in Oman is any indication, the Cultural Envoy project has a bright future indeed. The level of interest shown by Omani youth in the Envoys' activities, combined with the universal expressions of goodwill directed towards these talented Americans, bodes well for cultural and sports programming in the region.

BALTIMORE